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SAN GABRIEL VALLEY

EPA Rethinks Its Strategy on Superfund Cleanup Project

By MIKE WARD, *Times Staff Writer*

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which has spent \$8.5 million on ground-water contamination in the San Gabriel Valley without developing a comprehensive plan or cleaning up any water, is reevaluating its approach.

The reevaluation comes amid growing criticism of EPA by water suppliers, community groups and political leaders.

Conferring on New Strategy

EPA spokesman Terry Wilson said the agency's regional office in San Francisco, which oversees the San Gabriel Valley Superfund project, is conferring with officials in Washington on a new strategy for attacking ground-water pollution.

That strategy will be unveiled, Wilson said, at a congressional hearing that Rep. Esteban E. Torres (D-La Puente) has scheduled in Baldwin Park June 5.

Wilson said EPA officials will not discuss any changes in priorities on the project until the hearing by the Small Business Committee's subcommittee on environment and labor, headed by Torres.

Torres has already berated EPA for a lack of progress in dealing with a contamination problem that was discovered nearly 10 years ago and has been on the Superfund priority list since 1984. Suspected carcinogens have seeped into more than one-fourth of the 400 wells in the Main San Gabriel Basin, jeopardizing the water supply of 1 million people.

"From the material presented to me so far by the agency," Torres said, "it appears to me that EPA has, at the very least, mismanaged the project. For 10 years they have been running around in circles trying to decide what to do and they still don't know."

EPA also will face strong criticism at the hearing from the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water

District, which imports water to the area; the Main San Gabriel Basin Watermaster, which oversees pumping from wells in the basin, and the Upper San Gabriel Valley Water Assn., which represents water suppliers.

Robert G. Berlien, general manager of the water district, has been authorized by all three agencies to tell the congressional hearing that EPA is moving much too slowly.

District Manager's Points

In testimony prepared for the hearing, Berlien has outlined these concerns:

- EPA has not developed an overall plan or cleaned up any water. "Water suppliers do not have a clear understanding of where the cleanup project is headed."

- Little progress has been made in finding out how pollutants contaminated ground water. The pollutants include trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene

(PCE) and other solvents. The sources must be found to make sure that contamination is not continuing and to identify polluters who can be billed for cleanup costs. Even though EPA is giving the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board \$1 million a year to find pollution sources, the water board says it will take 10 years to complete its initial survey at its present pace.

- EPA's decision to concentrate resources and efforts on preventing contaminated ground water from moving southward through the Whittier Narrows to the neighboring Central Basin is of little help to the San Gabriel Valley. Meanwhile, cleanup of the San Gabriel Valley's most polluted region, the Azusa-Baldwin Park area, is being deferred.

- EPA's decision to spend more than \$1.5 million to solve the pollution problem of a tiny El Monte water

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GROUND-WATER PROBLEMS IN THE SAN GABRIEL VALLEY

Here is an overview of the task facing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in cleaning up ground water in the San Gabriel Valley.

■ **Water basin:** Forty-six city water departments, private water companies and public water districts draw water out of the Main San Gabriel Basin through wells and pipe it to homes, businesses, schools and factories. Basin serves more than 1 million people in an area that covers nearly all of the San Gabriel Valley outside of Pasadena and Pomona.

■ **Discovery:** Tests in December, 1979, showed high amounts of trichloroethylene (TCE), an industrial solvent, in an Irwindale well.

■ **Superfund:** EPA added the Main San Gabriel Basin to its list of Superfund cleanup sites in 1984 and has spent more than \$8.5 million on the problem.

■ **Contaminants:** Primarily TCE and tetrachloroethylene, also known as perchloroethylene (PCE), both used in dry cleaning and as industrial solvents. Lesser amounts of carbon tetrachloride, another solvent. These compounds are classified as volatile organics—volatile because they evaporate easily and organic because they contain carbon.

■ **Current status:** More than one-fourth of the basin's 400 wells are contaminated with volatile organics. About 65 wells are shut down; 35 because of volatile organics and 30 because of unrelated contamination from nitrates, stemming from fertilizer or failed septic systems. Wells that have not been closed have such small amounts of contamination that the water meets state and federal standards or the water is treated or mixed with purer water.

■ **Health risk:** Some of the compounds have caused cancer in animal experiments. But by closing wells and treating or blending water, all water suppliers in the San Gabriel Valley are delivering water that meets federal and state drinking water standards.

■ **Sources:** Suspected causes of polluted wells include leaks from chemical storage tanks, spills while storage tanks are being filled or chemicals are being used, illegal dumping by companies or individuals, and leaks from scores of dumps that have been closed or from the few landfills that are still open.

■ **Cleanup Cost:** Estimated by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency at hundreds of millions of dollars over several decades.

Sources: Environmental Protection Agency reports and studies by water agencies.

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company that serves only 200 homes, Berlien said, "does not appear to us to be a reasonable decision." The problem could have been solved cheaply with a connection to another water supplier.

■ EPA's proposed change of engineering contractors "in mid-project can only result in significant time delays as one contractor phases out and another gears up to take over. Vast amounts of specific site experience will be lost in the change and large expenditures will be needed to educate the new engineering contractor."

Berlien said he understands that the current contractor, the environmental consulting and engineering firm of CH2M Hill, will be replaced on the San Gabriel Valley project by the Bechtel Co. next year. Wilson at EPA said that a change might be made, but contracts have not yet been signed.

Staff Increases

In his written testimony, Berlien said the water agencies believe that EPA should increase its staff on the San Gabriel Valley project, consider opening a local office, accelerate the search for pollution sources and immediately begin to clean up heavily contaminated ground water in Baldwin Park and Azusa.

In spite of his harsh criticism of the cleanup effort, Berlien said he hopes that EPA will not dwell on past mistakes but move forward. "We certainly do not wish to see EPA expending its limited resources on justifying its past actions," he said.

EPA has committed more than \$15.3 million to the ground-water cleanup thus far, including \$8.5 million already spent.

A new accounting by EPA of funds obligated to the project lists \$6.5 million for studies of the basinwide problem, \$2.3 million for studies in the Whittier Narrows area, \$1 million for the design of a treatment system for polluted wells in Whittier Narrows, nearly \$2 million for the study of pollution problems of three small El Monte water companies and construction of a treatment system for one of them, and more than \$1.5 million for a search for pollution sources.

Wilson said that organizing the cleanup project has been difficult because the problem is so vast and complex. EPA estimated last year that it might take \$800 million and decades of work to remove the industrial solvents that have seeped into ground water.

Also testifying at the hearing will be representatives of the East

Valleys Organization, a church-based community action group that has put ground-water cleanup at the top of its agenda.

John L. Korey, chairman of a task force studying the ground-water issue for the group, said EPA has not given the San Gabriel Valley the attention it deserves.

"We see this as a key issue in the valley," Korey said. "People are becoming concerned." Korey said his group's goal is to create so much awareness of the problem that EPA's top administrator in Washington "will wake up in the morning worrying about the quality of water in the San Gabriel Valley."

Carol Montano, a task force member, said that although EPA has put "an incredible amount of research and investigation" into the San Gabriel Valley project, it has failed to pursue polluters aggressively and make them pay for the cleanup. "There's definitely been foot-dragging," she said.